***Every Revolution is Revolutionary in Its Own Way***

**Simon Sebag Montefiore**

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**“A revolution resembles the death of a fading star, an exhilarating Technicolor explosion that gives way not to an ordered new galaxy but to a nebula, a formless cloud of shifting energy.”**

**Explain further.**

**Questions:**

1. What have all the Arab monarchies rested upon?

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1. What are the causes of revolutions?
2. What does the ability to crush revolutions depend upon?
3. What tends to happen after the revolution in terms of leadership?
4. According to the author, what is the future of Egypt? Of Libya?
5. Which countries are most important in determining the future of the Arab world?
6. “Old Europe is at the beginning of the end, but New Europe however has not yet even begun its existence, and between the End and the Beginning, there will be Chaos.” Can we apply Lenin’s quote to the Arab world?

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**Every Revolution Is Revolutionary in Its Own Way**

**By SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE**

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A REVOLUTION resembles the death of a fading star, an exhilarating Technicolor explosion that gives way not to an ordered new galaxy but to a nebula, a formless cloud of shifting energy. And though every revolution is different, because all revolutions are local, in this uncertain age of Arab uprisings and Western interventions, as American missiles [bombard a defiant Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/africa/26libya.html?ref=world) in Libya, as the ruler of Yemen [totters on the brink](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/middleeast/26yemen.html?hp) and [Syrian troops fire on protesters](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html?hp), the history of revolution can still offer us some clues to the future.

The German sociologist Max Weber cited three reasons for citizens to obey their rulers: “the authority of the eternal yesterday,” or historical prestige; “the authority of the extraordinary personal gift of grace,” or the ruler’s charisma; and “domination by virtue of legality,” or order and justice. The “authority of the eternal yesterday” is especially important because in the Arab world even republics tend to be dynastic.

Before his ouster, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was grooming hereditary heirs. Before his death in 2000, Hafez al-Assad, the long-reigning Syrian dictator, handed over power to his son Bashar. Colonel Qaddafi has long ruled through a phalanx of thuggish dauphins, each playing a different role — one the totalitarian enforcer, another, the pro-Western liberalizer — and each vying for the succession. Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh similarly is safeguarded by special forces commanded by sons and nephews.

Yet “the life span of a dynasty corresponds to the life span of an individual,” wrote Ibn Khaldun, the brilliant 14th-century Islamic historian-statesman. All these Arab “monarchies” have rested on the prestige of a religion (Saudi Wahhabism or Iranian Twelver Shiism), a personality (in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the revolution; in Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, the memory of the most popular Arab ruler since Saladin, President Gamal Abdel Nasser; in Saudi Arabia, the founder-king Ibn Saud) or a heredity link (Jordan’s King Abdullah II’s descent from Muhammad). But “prestige ... decays inevitably,” ruled Ibn Khaldun.

Revolutions are set off by dramatic events, yes — a stolen election in Iran in 2009, a self-immolation in Tunisia. But they also reflect longstanding economic depression, not to mention rising expectations and the temptations of comparison: the Internet meant Arab youth could now compare their own stunted rights with those of their Western counterparts. The generational difference between their wizened pharaohs and the Twitter-obsessed youth worsened the crisis, which may yet mark the end of the ancient paradigm of the Arab ruler, the wise strong sheik, el Rais, the Boss. A dictator who is regularly mocked by the young for his Goth-black dyed hair and surgically enhanced cheekbones, and whose entourage features as many nurses as generals, is in trouble — he has lost “the personal gift of grace.”

Such dictators are often so sclerotic that they do not even realize there is a revolution until it is upon them. In 1848, Prince Metternich, the Austrian chancellor, was so old that he literally could not hear the mobs outside his own palace. When the riots started, I imagine Colonel Qaddafi or King Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain had a conversation something like this one:

“So what is it? A riot?” asked King Louis XVI in Paris in 1789.

“No, Sire,” replied his confidant La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, “it is a revolution.”

Leaderless revolutions without organization have a magically spontaneous momentum that is harder to crush. Lenin had just reflected that the revolution would never happen in his lifetime when in February 1917, hungry crowds in Petrograd overthrew Nicholas II while the revolutionaries were abroad, exiled or infiltrated by the secret police.

This time, headless spontaneity has been aided by Facebook, which certainly accelerates the mobilization of crowds — and the transmission of Western culture, whether it concerns Charlie Sheen’s soliloquies or the joys of American democracy. But technology’s effect is exaggerated: in 1848, the revolution that most resembles today’s, uprisings spread from Sicily to Paris, Berlin, Vienna and Budapest in mere weeks without telephones, let alone Twitter. They spread through the exuberance of momentum and the rigid isolation of repressive rulers.

Once the crowds are in the streets, the ability to crush revolutions depends on the ruler’s willingness and ability to shed blood. The more moderate the regimes, like the Shah’s Iran in 1979 or Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, the easier to overthrow. The more brutal the police state, like Colonel Qaddafi’s Libya, President Saleh’s Yemen or President Assad’s Syria, the tougher to bring down. Iran has brutally repressed its opposition — it helps to not be an American ally and to exclude the international news media, as it’s much easier to massacre your people without being restrained by the State Department or CNN.

“Very pleasing commencements,” wrote Edmund Burke, observer of the French Revolution’s spiral from freedom to terror, “have often shameful, lamentable conclusions.” Look at Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution against Syria and its ally Hezbollah, which has ended with a Syrian-backed, Hezbollah-dominated government. The first success of revolution creates the exuberant dizziness of democratic freedom that we saw in Cairo and Benghazi. In Europe in 1848, in Russia in 1917, there were similarly exhilarating springs.

Often temporary leaders arise — think of Aleksandr Kerensky, the strutting Russian prime minister for some months before the Bolsheviks seized power — but every revolution has its figures who provide fig leafs for the hard men. Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bazargan, a democrat, as his prime minister, who ended up resigning during the hostage crisis.

The fiesta does not last long. The disorder, uncertainty and strife of a revolution make citizens yearn for stable authority, or they turn to radicalism. Certainly, extremists welcome this deterioration, as Lenin, that laconic dean of the university of revolutionology, expressed it with the slogan: “The worse, the better.” (At that point, extreme solutions become more palatable: “How can one make a revolution without firing squads?” asked Lenin.)

At this stage, leadership becomes vital: Lenin personally drove the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. Khomeini was decisive in creating a Shiite theocracy in Iran in 1979 just as Nelson Mandela ensured a peaceful transition in South Africa. But there are no clear opposition leaders in Libya, Yemen or Syria: a ruthless security apparatus has long since decimated any such candidates.

In 1848, the democratic spring did not last long before outside intervention: Czar Nicholas I of Russia crushed the revolutions in the Habsburg Empire, earning him the soubriquet “the gendarme of Europe.” The Saudi intervention against Shiite rebels in Bahrain suggests the Saudis are the gendarmes of the Gulf; in Yemen, President Saleh has also begged for Saudi help, which they have so far withheld. In Libya, of course, the reverse has happened: the West is backing the rebels against Colonel Qaddafi’s onslaught. Each case is different; all revolutions are local.

Whatever happens next in the Arab world, it will not simply be a reversion to Mubarak-ish military pharaohism. After the upheavals of 1848, strange political hybrids, modern yet authoritarian, emerged from the uncertainty: first Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the so-called prince-president and later emperor, in France; and, later, in the 1860s, Otto von Bismarck in Prussia. In complex Egypt, the result of the Arab revolutions is likely to be a similar hybrid, a new democracy, with the military in a special role of Turkish-style guardianship; in repressed Libya, it may simply be a return to tribal rivalry.

Libya, strafed by British and American planes, may be in the headlines but it is a minor country: it is the destinies of the key three — Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran — that will decide everything. After all, Prince Metternich, the conservative Austrian who dominated Europe between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the revolutions of 1848, said, “When Paris sneezes, Europe catches cold.”

Lesser countries, however, can hold the key to major ones: Syria is the old Arab heartland. The uprising in Syria could encourage resurgent revolution in its patron, Iran, which faces the challenge of exploiting the uprisings that undermine American allies without succumbing to its own unrest. Change in Syria could also liberate Lebanon from Hezbollah; the fall of the Bahraini king could infect the Saudi monarchy — just as Nasser’s overthrow of King Farouk in 1952 in Egypt led to the liquidation of the Iraqi monarchy a few years later. And we should always remember that however liberal these Facebooking revolutions may be, the rivalries between Shiite and Sunni are far more potent than Twitter and democracy.

What’s next? When Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Communist prime minister, analyzed the French Revolution two centuries later, he declared that “it’s too early to tell.” We should remember that while enthusiasts have repeatedly cited the revolutions of 1989 to 1991 as the encouraging precedent for today’s revolutions, how successful were those? Democracy flowered in Eastern Europe as well as Georgia and the Baltic countries, but most former Soviet republics are dictatorships like Uzbekistan or Belarus, or authoritarian like Putinist Russia.

No single American doctrine can or should fit this newly kaleidoscopic, multifaceted universe that is the Middle East from Iran to Morocco. We must realize this will be a long game, the grand tournament of the 21st century. We should protect innocent lives when we can — with limited airpower, not boots on the ground. We must analyze which countries matter to us strategically, and after the Facebook party dies down and the students exit the streets, figure out who is really controlling events in the places important to us.

 The wisest judgments belong to statesmen who knew much about crushing and making revolutions.  “Old Europe is at the beginning of the end,” reflected the ultraconservative Metternich as he was beset by revolutions, “but New Europe however has not yet even begun its existence, and between the End and the Beginning, there will be Chaos.” Lenin understood that the ultimate question in each revolution is always the unfathomable alchemy of power: who controls whom. Or as he put it so succinctly: “Who whom?”

*Simon Sebag Montefiore is the author of the forthcoming “Jerusalem: The Biography.”*